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SUBJECT: SEEKING ELECTORAL GAINS LEFT PARTIES COME DOWN  
HARD ON US/INDIA DEFENSE AGREEMENT, RAISE STAKES FOR PM'S  
JULY 18 VISIT

Classified By: Charge Bob Blake, for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

1. (C) Summary: India's Left parties have severely criticized the "New Framework for the US-India Defense Relationship" signed by SecDef Rumsfeld and DefMin Mukherjee on June 28, despite initial positive reviews from most Indian media and strategic commentators, and will hold street demonstrations against it on July 8. The CPI(M) politburo's July 2 statement criticizes the agreement for tying the GOI too closely to the US and the UPA for ignoring previous promises to pursue an independent foreign policy and "multipolarity." The Communist stance is ideologically consistent and is tied to their opposition to UPA domestic and economic initiatives. The Communists expect to do very well in upcoming Legislative Assembly elections in West Bengal and Kerala and want to demonstrate to their party faithful that their support for the UPA does not mean that they have sacrificed their independence. That being said, their public attack on the Defense Minister's US visit raises the stakes for Prime Minister Singh to secure substantial deliverables from his Washington visit that he can cite to critics of the transformed US-India relationship. End Summary

Virulent Criticism

2. (U) The Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPI-M), India's largest and most powerful Communist party, issued a scathing denunciation of the recently-concluded US-India defense agreement on July 2, and called for nationwide demonstrations against the agreement on July 8. Describing the agreement as a "major step," the CPI-M criticized the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government for placing India in the same category as Japan, South Korea and the Philippines, "all traditional military allies of the US."

3. (U) The CPI(M)'s specific objections included:

--The agreement did not mention the Common Minimum Program (CMP), the GOI's ambitious social welfare agenda.

--The UPA did not first determine whether such an agreement was in line with its earlier commitment to "pursue an independent foreign policy and promote multipolarity in international relations."

--The agreement commits the GOI and the USG to "collaborate in multinational operations when it is in their common interest," without mentioning whether "it would be under the auspices of the United Nations."

--This allows Indian forces to be used in US-led military operations under US command.

--According to the CPI(M), the agreement demonstrates that the UPA does not "view security issues in Asia as those which can be discussed and resolved among the Asian countries, but seeks to advance US interests in the region."

--The party claimed that the real object of the agreement was "containment of China, using India as a counterweight."

4. (U) The CPI(M) also expressed "surprise" that "the UPA government has continued with the Vajpayee government's policy with regard to missile defense," arguing that the US is trying to draw India into its missile defense shield "under the cover of the US providing the Patriot missile system." The party denounced plans for co-production of defense equipment as a ploy to "lure India to buy F-16 fighter planes and open the market for US weaponry."

5. (U) In a separate statement the much smaller Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), which has a Maoist orientation, decried the agreement as an attempt by the US to "impose its unipolar hegemony," pointing out that "the move initiated by Russia and China to invite India into an Asian grouping to challenge US hegemony was quite disturbing to the US."

Left Objectives

6. (C) The CPI(M) and its communist partners likely objected to the defense agreement for these reasons:

--Defense Minister Pranab Mukherjee is, like much of the CPI(M) leadership, a Bengali, and both come from the same Bengali leftist political tradition. As the UPA liaison with the all-important left parties, Mukherjee's job is to keep the Left happy and ensure that they continue to support the UPA coalition. With its criticism of the defense agreement, the CPI(M) has put Mukherjee on notice that it is not happy with his performance and he must demonstrate more sympathy towards the left agenda.

--The CPI(M) faces legislative elections in its two key strong-holds of West Bengal and Kerala this year and expects to win big victories in both contests. As part of its preparation for the elections and to rally the party cadre, it is emphasizing its ideological roots and demonstrating that it is not subservient to Congress.

--Communist popularity is growing and the Left parties have ambitious plans to expand into other states, notably Bihar and Andhra Pradesh. The BJP/NDA tailspin and the increase in Communist popularity has fueled increasing speculation that the Left may eventually replace the BJP as the principal opposition to Congress. The Communist leadership is eager to carve out a space well to the left of Congress and demonstrate their independence.

The BJP Line

17. (U) In contrast to the Left, the BJP endorsed the defense agreement. Jaswant Singh, the BJP leader in the Rajya Sabha described it as a "strategic watershed," noting that, "as far as defense preparedness goes, it is welcome from the point of view of diversification of weapons systems." Singh also expressed a note of caution, pointing out that it will be "a complex process," as the current environment was "not conducive to new and bold initiatives."

Domestic and Foreign

18. (C) Communist objection to the defense pact and many elements of the US-India relationship reiterates Left objections to the pro-American foreign policy and complements Communist stances on domestic and economic issues. The Communists have refused to back down on their objection to alleged UPA "privatization" of the profit-making public sector Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL), and have sponsored demonstrations and work stoppages to protest petroleum price hikes. It now plans similar protests against the defense agreement.

Comment

19. (C) The Left's demonstrated disdain for Mukherjee's visit is a sharp departure from the overwhelmingly positive reaction of strategic analysts and most media. However, the virulent criticism heaped by the Left on Mukherjee's visit to the US in general, and on the defense agreement specifically, may be a harbinger of the domestic criticism that the Prime Minister may face during his July 18-21 visit to the US. Such vitriol raises the stakes for the PM's visit in terms of what Congress will need to do to allay the Left's concerns that the party has effectively abandoned India's principles of independence and multipolarity. The Communists' public attack on the Defense Minister's US visit will increase pressure on Prime Minister Singh to secure substantial deliverables from his Washington visit.

BLAKE